

Defensive Unblocking at Bridge
(August 23, 2021)

When your partner leads a suit, you have to be very careful NOT to block the suit should you hold big cards in the suit. For example:

Example 1.	AK5	Contract: 3NT
???6(?)	QJ4	Opening Lead: 6 of spades
?		

Your partner leads the six of spades against a 3NT contract. Declarer plays the king. East's proper play is the **jack** at trick one. If East plays low, he will be certain to win one trick and may **BLOCK** out partner from being able to cash out the suit. When the ace is played, East must play his **queen** in order to get out of his partner's way. Using the **Rule of Eleven**, East knows his partner has five cards to the **ten spot**.

The same principle applies when you hold an honor and one other card in partner's suit. For example:

Example 2.	432	Contract: 3NT
J???	Q5	Opening Lead: J of spades
?		

When partner leads the jack, you should play your **queen** in order to get out of the way. If you had held K5, you should play your **king**. Your partner has probably led from the J109x of spades.

However, if you can see that by unblocking you will lose a trick because of dummy's holding, you should NOT unblock. For example:

Example 3.	9743	Contract: 3NT
QJ10x(x)	Kx	Opening Lead: queen of spades
?		

If you incorrectly play the king when partner leads the queen, the nine in the dummy will subsequently become a winner.

The following example illustrates the importance of overtaking your partner's honor card to prevent blocking the suit.

Example 4.	1086		Contract: 4H
	KQ732	A4	Opening Lead: king of spades
	J95		

When your partner leads the king, you should overtake and return the four. Partner wins and plays a third spade for you to ruff. Your side gets the first three tricks. If you play low at trick one, the suit is **blocked**. Declarer may be able to get rid of his third spade. NOTE: Don't overtake if ruffing the third spade can cost you a natural trump trick, i.e., you hold the QJx of trumps.

Example five below illustrates what card to play when your partner leads the queen of a suit at a notrump contract.

Example 5.	432		Contract: 3NT
	KQ1095	J7	Opening Lead: queen of spades
	A86		

When your partner leads the queen of a suit at notrump, he is asking you to drop the jack under his queen. This convention is designed mainly to help the opening leader locate the jack. If you don't play the jack, he will assume that South holds that elusive card.

NOTE: When your partner leads an honor, he wants to know if you have a high honor. If you do, signal with the highest spot you can afford. If you don't, play the lowest card you can. If you do hold a higher honor, either overtake or unblock as appropriate.

Example six below illustrates what card to play when your partner leads the king of a suit at a notrump contract.

Example 6.	73		Contract: 4H
	KQ1054	982	Opening Lead: king of spades
	AJ6		

When your partner leads the king of spades, you need to play the lowest card (2) that you hold in the suit. You are trying to discourage him from continuing the suit. Hopefully, your partner will know to shift to another suit rather than to continue spades into the "jaws" of the declarer.

Let's look at the following two hands which will clearly illustrate how important it is to unblock.

Example 7.

975
K932
K862
KQ

Contract: 3NT

Opening Lead: 4 of clubs

K62
J10
1053
A9643

843
Q654
J74
J107

AQJ10
A78
AQ9
852

South is playing in 3NT. When West leads the four of clubs, the declarer plays the king. What card should East play at trick one?

East should recognize the lead as fourth best ($11 - 4 = 7$). He determines that among the remaining hands there are seven cards larger than the four. He can see five of them, leaving two for the declarer.

When South plays the king at trick one, East must set about to **unblock** his high cards, i.e., the jack and ten of clubs. He should play the ten on the first trick. When declarer finesses the queen of spades at trick two, West wins with his king. When West plays the ace of clubs, East must ditch the jack of clubs. Now, West can cash the nine, six and three of clubs and set the contract.

The key play is that East must NOT retain his two high clubs. If he does so, he will win the third club trick. Unfortunately, West does not have another entry in order to cash out the now established club suit.

Example 8.

A104
A
9543
AJ1043

Contract: 3NT

Opening Lead: 6 of hearts

Q753
Q9763
J2
92

J86
KJ5
Q1076
K85

Bidding: 1C 2C*
2N 3N

* = Inverted Minors, GF

K92
10842
AK8
Q76

South is the declarer at a contract of 3NT. West leads the six of hearts, dummy plays the ace. East should play the **jack of hearts**. This play serves a dual purpose. It signals to partner that a continuation of the suit is desired. It starts to **unblock** for partner, who no doubt has a five-card suit.

Note the difference if East retains the jack of hearts. When he is in with the king of clubs, he will cash the kings of hearts and follow with the jack. West cannot afford to overtake. But, if East has correctly retained the 5 of hearts at this point, a lead through declarer's 10-8 of hearts would clear up the entire suit for his partner.

The final two examples illustrate how the defenders can **block** the declarer from running a suit by making a **holding up play**.

Example 9.	83		Contract: 3NT
	J62		
	KJ1064		Opening Lead: Queen of spades
	954		
		652	Bidding: 2C 2D
QJ1074		10743	2N 3N
985		A83	
75		J72	
KQ8			
	AK9		
	AKQ		
	Q92		
	A1063		

Analysis of Hand: Declarer has 6 tricks (2S, 3H, 1C). When he knocks out the ace of diamonds, he can cash enough tricks in that suit to make his contract.

The declarer wins the first spade trick and leads his queen of diamonds at trick 2. What is the correct way to defend this contract? **When the declarer leads a suit, you must give count (high to indicate an even number of cards or low to show an odd number of cards).**

If your partner does not hold the ace of diamonds, then it makes no difference whether you play the 7 or the 5 of diamonds. Declarer is going to take 11 tricks. However, when your partner holds the ace of diamonds, he will need to know when to play it. Winning the first round will definitely be wrong. The declarer most definitely has at least two diamonds for his NT bid.

The problem for East will come on the second round when the declarer leads the two of diamonds and plays the king from the board. If the two is the declarer's last diamond, then East should win the second round. This will restrict declarer to just one diamond trick; he will not be able to return to dummy. If instead declarer started with three diamonds, East must not win with the ace of diamonds until the third round

How can East know when to take his ace of diamonds? The only way is for West to give **count when declarer leads the queen of diamonds**. By playing the 7 followed by the 5 on the second round (high-low), East will know that declarer holds three diamonds and will hold up taking his ace until the third round.

Two spades, three hearts, two diamonds and one club will give declarer only eight tricks. The defenders have set the contract!

NOTE: When declarer plays a suit, partner should always try to give the count signal. This will allow your partner to judge when he should take his stopper in the suit. This is one of the most important techniques when defending a notrump contract. **It is essential to give partner count when dummy has a long suit and NO outside entry to the dummy.**

Example 10.

A85
874
KJ1073
94

Contract: 3NT

Opening Lead: 2 of spades

J962
J5
852
Q632

1073
Q1092
AQ6
KJ5

Bidding: 1N 2C
2H 2N*
3N P

KQ4
AK63
94
A1087

* = may not have 4 card major; GI

West leads the two of spades, dummy plays low, and declarer wins your 10 of spades with the king. He leads the nine of diamonds from his hand, West following with the two of diamonds, and dummy playing low. What is your plan for the defense?

It may seem that you can afford to win with the queen and return a spade, hoping that this will drive out dummy's ace. Your subsequent intention would be to hold up the ace of diamonds, if need be, to kill dummy's diamond suit. This line of defense will not be good enough. The declarer will win your spade return in his hand, with the queen, and clear the diamond suit while he still has the ace of spades in dummy as an entry. He will score three diamond tricks and six top winners in the other suits. **He wins the RACE.**

To kill the diamond suit, you must allow South's nine of diamonds to win, even though you hold a double stopper in the suit. Declarer continues with a diamond to the ten and you win with your queen. South can use his ace of spades as an entry to the diamond suit; but, you still hold the ace, which keeps South from running the suit. **Your side wins the RACE.**

ASSIGNMENT:

Next week we are going to look at unblocking from the standpoint of the declarer. Just as we unblock suits when we are trying to run a suit as declarer, we need to do so when on defense. Specifically, when we are defending a notrump contract, we frequently try to run a long suit. We want to set up that suit by knocking out the declarer's stopper(s) while also untangling and unblocking our cards in the suit. Unblocking a suit is sometimes hard to see. Always think about which card to play when your partner has made the opening lead.

1. Partner leads a suit and you hold AJ2. If dummy does not have an honor for you to hold onto the ace to capture, win the ace at trick 1. **At trick two, why is it important to return the jack rather than the two?**

2. Partner leads a suit and you hold AJ32. As in 1, you should win the trick with the ace. **At trick two, does it make a difference which card you return? Is there a danger in blocking the suit?**

 3. Partner leads a suit and you hold AJ102. As in 1 and 2, you win the ace. **At trick 2, does it matter which card you return?**
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Assignment from last week: How do you bid the following hand?

Axx
 Kxxx
 AKx
 AKx

KQxx
 AQJxx
 xx
 xx

South opens 2D (Flannery Convention) showing 4S/5H and 11-15 HCP. One way to bid the hand is as follows:

2D	2NT (size/shape asking bid)
3H (2/2 in minors; minimum hand)	4S (Kickback for key cards)
4N (1 or 4 key cards)	5C (Queen ask; outside king ask)
5N (Queen of hearts; king of spades)	7NT or 7H

Next Week: Declarer Unblocking

